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# Situating South Indian Activist Biographies and Subjectivities: The Personal is Problematic

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“Biographies of Activism” seminar, Newcastle University 21-22<sup>nd</sup> June 2010  
‘Activism, Volunteering & Citizenship’ ESRC Seminar Series



# Overview

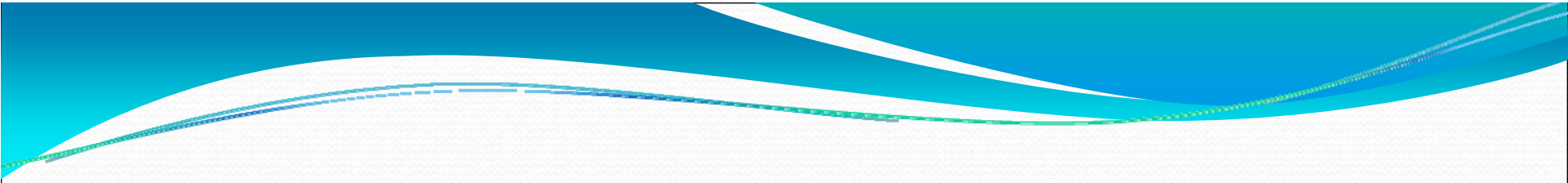
- Consider life history methodologies as a way of capturing biographical accounts of activism and non-elite cosmopolitanism
- Argue that biographical methods may run the risk of reinscribing rather than challenging power relations
- Explore the difficulty in disentangling cosmopolitan narratives of individuals and institutions



# Biographical Methods: Unsettling Dominant Narratives of Development?

- Life history methods extensively used in the global North, particularly as a mechanism for recording communities' histories of struggle
- Assumption that life history methods are transformational or emancipatory for participants whose voices have traditionally been marginalised
  - Not straightforward or unproblematic
- Provide a partial & subjective account of events that reflect the narrator's present circumstances as much as their past (Miles & Crush 1993; Harding 2006)





“Through oral history, then, those often excluded from authoritative versions, can inscribe their experiences on the historical record and offer their own interpretations of processes which connect their stories with their present day circumstances.”  
(Kothari & Hulme 2004: 7)



# South India Case Study

- Ongoing interest in problematising narratives of a cosmopolitan global civil society by engaging with actors largely ignored within most accounts of civil society and development (Baillie Smith & Jenkins in press)
  - NGO activists in the global South who fall between the grassroots and the professionalised sphere of international development
- Shaped by concepts of cosmopolitanism and particularly ideas of ‘non-elite openness to difference’ (Kothari 2008).
- Life history approaches appeared to provide a potential way to capture:
  - the perspectives of non-elite actors, and their accounts of engaging with and in the international development industry
  - the shifting temporal and spatial aspect of cosmopolitan subjectivities
- Life history interviews with 15 NGO activists in summer 2009
  - “Can you tell us about how you became an activist and how your experiences have changed during your time as an activist”



# Emerging Tensions in Researching Activist Biographies

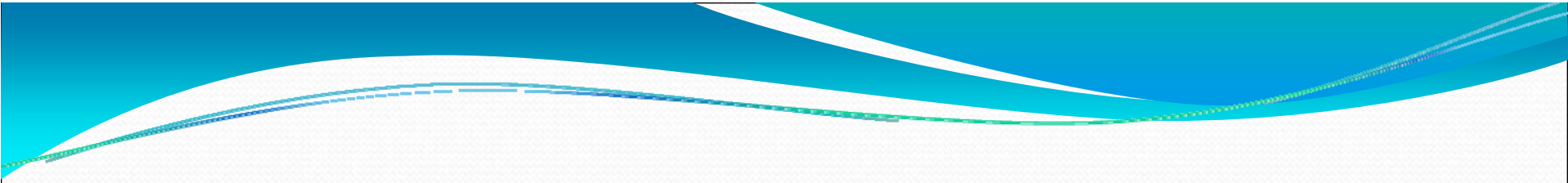
- Key challenge that emerged – apparent reluctance of interviewee to narrate their *personal* history
  - Stories of organisations
  - Locating histories within well established genealogies of development practice (e.g. ‘basic needs’; ‘gender and development’)
  - Individual biographies and the ‘particular’ remained obscured or concealed
  - Personal experiences of ‘being’ cosmopolitan or becoming cosmopolitan obscured/downplayed



# Locating Activists' Cosmopolitanisms

- Identifying activists' responses as problematic is effectively to construct a subjectivity into which we expect them to fit
- “It is a mistake to assume that people everywhere regard biographical information as interesting or revealing in the way that many in the West imagine.” (Yarrow 2008: 336)
- How were we and they ‘being cosmopolitan’ through the research process?
- Research produced through and against histories and narratives of development – we are part of the relations that we want to problematise



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- Importance of social, political and cultural context in shaping understandings of activists' cosmopolitanisms
    - Interaction of our own roots as researchers in increasingly neoliberalised context that values individuality and autonomy with interviewees' context where collectivity and community have historically been emphasised
    - Many activists defined themselves in opposition to what they conceived as neoliberal and individualistic trajectories of younger activists



# Concluding Thoughts

- Need to locate activists' cosmopolitan subjectivities in particular social, cultural and historical context
- Individuals may manifest their commitments to social justice through a range of institutional and apparently collective narratives
- Conceptualising biographical interviewing as intersubjective may provide a more productive space for co-creation of ideas